

Welcoming New Citizens: Naturalization Ceremony in Lawrence

September 17, 2007

In preparing to speak to you today, one of my first thoughts was that each of you have something more interesting and likely more important to say about America and citizenship than I do. I wish we had the time to hear from each one of you personally, because I believe you each have an important story to tell.

If we had that time, I would like to know a lot of things about your story.

Why did you come to the United States?

Were there struggles and difficult circumstances you had to overcome to get to where you are today?

How did you persevere?

Were there those who helped you along your journey?

What made you want to become a citizen?

Individually, your answers to these questions would be different because your stories are different. Yet, taken together, they would comprise the story of generations that came before you. Your stories are the story of America.

The great American author, John Steinbeck wrote that "our land is of every kind geologically and climatically, and our people are of every kind also - of every face, of every ethnic category - and yet our land is one nation, and our people are Americans. The motto of the United States, 'E Pluribus Unum' - Out of Many One - is a fact."

Since the beginning of our country, people from all parts of the world have come to the United States to pursue their God-given rights and in search of a better life for themselves and their families. You are part of that tradition. When you walked in to this building this morning, you came as Chinese, Mexicans, Filipino - citizens of other nations. Yet, when you leave, you will leave as Americans.

It's been said that American society is a process, not a conclusion. With each new immigrant that becomes a citizen, America changes. We are a dynamic country. New citizens contribute to our nation in novel ways. They bring new ideas and new ways of understanding. The innovativeness of new citizens helps make America the best country in the world. Today, you continue this process of building American society.

This is not only a special day because of the oath you take, but because today we celebrate the Constitution. 220 years ago, on September 17, 1787, the 39 delegates of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia signed the United States Constitution. After months of deliberation and compromise, the document that defines our government and the rights of the people was agreed to.

As a Member of Congress, I take an oath after every election similar to yours to protect and defend the Constitution. When we take this oath to support the Constitution, we are pledging to do our part to make the United States the best country it can be. Citizenship is not only about what you are entitled to as an American but it is also about responsibility. Generations of people just like you have contributed to our society and helped shape America into the great country it is today. I am excited to see what contributions you will make.

Former Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis once said, "the most important office is that of the private citizen." Everyday citizens have answered their country's call throughout history. They are the ones that change the course of our country's history. All offices come with duties and the office of citizen is no exception. While there are many responsibilities that come with citizenship, I want to focus on three.

Perhaps the most important responsibility you now have is to participate in elections. People have fought and died throughout history for the right to have their voice heard by the government. Unfortunately, too many Americans forget the struggles others went through to secure this right. Don't take the right to vote lightly. Cherish it and exercise your right in elections.

In addition to voting, you have a responsibility to work with others to build strong communities. We can do a lot as individuals but we can do more when we work hand in hand with those around us. Kansans are known for the care they show their neighbors. I encourage you to build relationships with those in your community and work with others to make Kansas an even better place to live. We change our world one person at a time.

Finally, don't keep your story to yourself. Share it. While you each have a unique story, there are common elements in all of them. You each have stories from your homeland and stories of your life in America. If you have children that were born in the United States, they will not know what it was like in your homeland. It is important that you tell them about it. By telling them your story about why you came to the United States and what you went through to get here, your children will have a better appreciation for our shared country. Almost worse than not having

any rights, opportunity or freedom is taking these things for granted. Help your children appreciate our country.

If anyone knows the courage it takes to establish a life in a new country, it is you. The trials you have faced and the joyous moments you have had give you special appreciation for the rewards this country has to offer. Your experience gives you a unique perspective on America. By sharing your story, you remind those of us who were born here, about the great opportunities this country offers.

I am honored to be here today and share in this exciting moment in your lives and the life of our nation. All Americans should, at some point in their life, witness a naturalization ceremony. It makes one proud to be an American.

Congratulations on becoming a United States citizen.